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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 006658

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SUBJECT: SNAPSHOT OF A BORDER CROSSING AND HOPES THAT ABU MAZEN WILL BRING IMPROVEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Gaza-based NYT stringer Taghreed el-Khodary told the Ambassador December 22 that Gazans are even more interested in having Abu Mazen elected than are West Bank Palestinians -- not from any great love of Abu Mazen, but rather from the positive experience they remember from his brief tenure in 2003. Hamas, according to el-Khodary, will hold out for a mutual cease-fire with Israel and for positions in any post-election PA as its price for halting attacks. Other militant groups would be inclined to cease attacks if the PA offers them jobs, most likely in the security structures. If not brought in to the governing structures in a manner it considers sufficient, Hamas members with whom el-Khodary has spoken told her they "will turn (the situation) into hell." El-Khodary said she believes that if Hamas is actually brought into the government, however, "they will behave." After an almost seven-hour ordeal at Erez as she tried to cross into Israel, el-Khodary said that she had witnessed firsthand the anger of average Palestinians -- the citizenry and the PA security personnel -- at both the treatment they receive at the hands of the Israeli soldiers and what she termed the arrogance demonstrated by PA officials who "breeze through" the checkpoints ahead of sick people who wait hours to cross into Israel for medical treatment. End Summary.

Erez Crossing

2. (SBU) In a meeting December 23, Gaza-based NYT stringer Taghreed el-Khodary gave the Ambassador a snapshot of views gathered during a time-consuming journey into Israel from Gaza City via the Erez Crossing. El-Khodary's journey through the Erez Crossing took a total of seven hours, despite the Embassy's assistance and receipt of clearances in advance from the IDF and the Office for Coordination and General Administration in the Territories (COGAT). El-Khodary characterized her trip as a learning experience, where she experienced firsthand what the average Palestinian -- of the few who are fortunate enough to receive a permit -- goes through in order to exit the Gaza Strip. The day began at 0700 hours when el-Khodary received word that her permit was approved; she was told to be at the crossing at 1000 hours to collect it and enter Israel. The permit was eventually ready only at 1300 hours, after numerous phone calls from the Embassy to spur issuance. In the interim, el-Khodary cooled her heels at the Palestinian checkpoint several hundred meters from the crossing area. She eventually received her corrected permit -- the first one authorized her travel to the wrong city on the wrong day -- at approximately 1630 hours.

Why Should I Protect Them When They Treat Me Like This?

3. (SBU) El-Khodary said that as she waited, she chatted with, among others, a PA security officer, who confessed to being angry and humiliated with how the IDF soldiers that he worked with daily treated him. Why should I protect them, he said, when they show me no respect? One of these days, I probably won't, he concluded. El-Khodary watched as PA officials "breezed through" the crossing, leaving average Palestinians -- some of whom were ill and had permits to enter Israel that day for medical treatment -- languishing on the Gaza side. The resentment was palpable, el-Khodary said, particularly when only five of the 25 medical cases were eventually allowed to cross, and then only near the end of the day. The rest were told to go home and reapply to cross another day. Both the GOI and the PA need to realize, she commented, that they do themselves no favors in the eyes of the population by giving PA officials preferential treatment. The behavior of IDF soldiers is "turning moderates into extremists," in el-Khodary's opinion.

4. (SBU) The Ambassador said that the GOI has plans to transfer control over checkpoints to civilian companies after disengagement, in order to address the current situation, which he agreed is bad for both the soldiers and the Palestinians. Progress on this and a host of other disengagement-related issues will be easier after the elections January 9 when, by all indications, the GOI and the

PA will be better able to work together directly rather than in parallel through the World Bank.

High Expectations from an Abu Mazen Government

15. (SBU) Gazans, el-Khodary said, want Abu Mazen in power even more than do West Bankers. Not that they like him all that much, she added, but people in Gaza wistfully recalled the "100 days" of Abu Mazen's 2003 premiership during which there was a cease-fire and free passage through the Abu Khouli checkpoint that divides Gaza in half just north of Khan Yunis. Gazans want Abu Mazen to get more workers into Israel or otherwise ensure jobs; that is concern number one, according to el-Khodary. The Ambassador said that the United States is ready and willing to work with Abu Mazen, but that the USG should not be put in the position of acting as a substitute for him. The fact that Abu Mazen has said openly that Palestinians should turn away from guns is very good, but he needs to take visible steps. No one is asking him to go after militants right away, but it is imperative that the immediate need for law and order be addressed. The Ambassador noted that if Abu Mazen begins to address security, even incrementally, Israeli officials have said that they will refrain from assassinations of militant leaders and hot pursuit attacks, with the exception of freedom to go after so-called ticking bombs.

16. (C) The Ambassador said that United States has also developed a package of proposals that it can rapidly deliver to help the expected Abu Mazen government show results to the Palestinian people in the first 90 days following the election. These proposals are in addition to the larger projects and budgetary support offered to the PA at the AHLIC meeting in Oslo earlier in December. While it will be difficult to coax the GOI to commit to once again allow Palestinian workers into Israel, the U.S. has pressed Israel to keep an open mind on the subject, leaving open the possibility of a more positive GOI position should some of Abu Mazen's plans bear fruit.

And What About Hamas?

17. (C) El-Khodary, who has wide-ranging contacts among many of the factions, said that Hamas wants to stop the attacks, but is holding out for a mutual cease-fire with Israel as well as positions (a "large piece of the cake," as el-Khodary put it) in any post-election PA. Other militant groups, in el-Khodary's opinion, would be inclined to cease attacks if the PA would offer them jobs, most likely in the security structures. Contacts in Hamas, el-Khodary said, have told her that the organization, if not brought into the governing structures in a manner it considers sufficient, "will turn (the situation) into hell." El-Khodary conjectured that, if Hamas is actually brought into the government, either through elections or through appointments to ministries, "they will behave."

International Observers

18. (SBU) El-Khodary questioned whether the international community would send observers into Gaza post-disengagement, either to deter conflicts or to investigate them afterwards. The Ambassador cautioned that such efforts, although well-intentioned, could easily go awry if, for example, the observers were used by militants as cover from which to launch attacks. Another problem, the Ambassador continued, is that observers, by definition, do not have much authority to take action beyond filing a report -- something that experience in south Lebanon has shown loses its punch over time.

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KURTZER